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ABSTRACT

In March 1977, the New Jersey Board of Higher Education created the New Jersey Basic Skills Assessment Program. To direct the program, the Board created the Basic Skills Council, which was charged with developing a test in reading, writing, and mathematics for all freshmen entering all New Jersey public colleges and universities. The purpose was to identify those students who might need remedial work before they could undertake regular college-level courses. The test was developed as a multiple choice test over the basic skills areas and a 20-minute essay written on an assigned topic. The essay is scored holistically by New Jersey college faculty. The test is used for placement purposes only, not for admission. Each college is responsible for interpreting the test scores according to its own academic standards. In the fall of 1978, 42,984 students were tested and in the fall of 1979, 47,725 students were tested. The results indicated a widespread need for remediation among entering freshmen. In 1978, 92% of those tested considered themselves average or above in their written expression ability; however, 43% were identified by their colleges as needing remedial work in writing. An analysis by one college of the value of using the test for placement indicated that only 3% of the students had been placed in inappropriate courses. Separate funding is now provided for remedial/developmental purposes. (MKM)

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STATEWIDE TESTING IN NEW JERSEY

Paper presented at 1979 MLA Meeting
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A preliminary note. To understand better the New Jersey college basic skills testing program, it is helpful to know that the State of New Jersey has only two requirements for a high school diploma: one year of United States history, and two years of physical education. There are no State requirements for English or mathematics. Also, New Jersey's community colleges, which enroll over 50% of the State's college population, are open admissions institutions which do not require a high school diploma for entrance. Finally, the testing program described in this paper was instituted by the New Jersey Board of Higher Education only after the Board decided that New Jersey colleges were not doing enough to meet the needs of underprepared students. The Board also indicated that the testing program could decrease the rate of academic droptouts in the colleges while at the same time maintaining high academic standards. As the policy making body for higher education in New Jersey, the Board, through its administrative arm, the Department of Higher Education, mandated for all New Jersey public colleges and universities the testing program described in this paper.

In March of 1977, the New Jersey Board of Higher Education created the New Jersey Basic Skills Assessment Program. To direct the program, the Board created the Basic Skills Council, a ten member faculty group composed of two representatives from the 18 public two-year colleges in the state, two representatives from the eight four-year state colleges, three representatives from Rutgers University, one representative from the New Jersey Institute of

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Technology, and one representative from the Department of Higher Education. The Council was empowered to recruit a faculty member from a New Jersey college to serve as the Executive Director of the Council. From July, 1977 to June, 1979 I served as the first Executive Director of the New Jersey Basic Skills Council while I was on professional leave from my position as Associate Professor and Director of Freshman English at Rutgers University. My successor is also a New Jersey college faculty member presently on leave from his college to fill the position.

The Basic Skills Council was charged with developing a test in reading, writing, and mathematics for all freshmen entering all New Jersey public colleges and universities beginning in the fall of 1978 and continuing each year thereafter. The purpose of the testing program is to assist colleges in identifying those students who may need remedial work before they can undertake regular college-level courses. The testing program is thus not an end in itself but only a means and is the first part of a three part program: one, the testing and identification of those students who need remedial assistance; two, the placement of such students into appropriate courses; and three, the evaluation of the character and effectiveness of the remedial/developmental programs at all the colleges. The testing program is, therefore, part of a statewide effort to meet the needs of those entering students who need remedial/developmental assistance in order to have the opportunity for success in college.

The time allowed to the Basic Skills Council for developing such a test was indeed short, but with the assistance of the Educational Testing Service, some very helpful advice from Ed White, and the cooperation of many New Jersey college faculty a preliminary form of the test was developed and pilot tested

in February of 1978. The final form of the test, which emerged after analyzing the results of some 10,000 students who took the test during the pilot testing, consists of a 125 item multiple-choice section covering reading comprehension, sentence structure, and logical relationships; a 30 item multiple-choice section on computation; a 30 item multiple-choice section on elementary algebra; and a 20-minute essay written on an assigned topic. The essay is holistically scored by New Jersey college faculty who gather at a central location at scheduled times during the testing year.

To assist in developing the test, the Council appointed advisory committees of faculty members from colleges across the state who worked on actually writing the test, reviewing the pilot test results, and revising the test using those results as well as their best professional judgment. Advisory committees were established in Reading and Writing, Mathematics, and Test and Measurements.

The Basic Skills Council is responsible for the design and development of the test, scoring the test, and reporting the results to the individual colleges and the Board of Higher Education. All costs for test development, test materials, scoring, and score reporting are covered by the Council; colleges are responsible only for the costs of test administration. After administering the test on its own campus according to its own schedule, a college submits the test to the Council for scoring, including the holistic reading of the student essay. The Council reports to the college the following results for each student tested: scaled and raw scores for Reading Comprehension, Sentence Structure, Logical Relationships, Computation, and Algebra; a raw score for the essay based upon two readers' scores; a scaled score for Composition which is based on the scores for Sentence Structure, Logical Relationships and the essay; a scaled score for Total English which is based on the scores for Reading

Comprehension, Sentence Structure, Logical Relationships, and the essay. In addition, descriptive cluster scores are provided for three areas of the Reading Comprehension section of the test, three areas of the Sentence Structure section of the test, and four areas on the Logical Relationships section of the test.

Colleges then use this information to assist in placing students into appropriate courses. Each college is responsible for interpreting the test scores according to its own academic standards. There is no statewide cut-off score for remediation. Moreover, the test must be administered after students are admitted to the college, and the results cannot be used as part of the admissions process. The results are to be used only for placement into appropriate courses.

In addition to these data, the colleges are provided also with background information on their entering freshmen. Students answer twelve background information questions which provide such information as the year of high school graduation, high school class rank, high school academic program, number of years in which the student studied English and mathematics in high school, how the student feels he or she compares with others in written expression and mathematical ability, and so on. This information assists the colleges in designing their programs and also assists the Basic Skills Council in analyzing the test results on a statewide basis. For example, 93% of the students tested in the fall of 1978 had studied English for three or more years in high school, and 92% of those tested considered themselves average or above in their written expression ability. Yet 43% of those tested were identified by the college as needing remedial work in writing. Students are also asked to identify the high school from which they graduated. Using this information, the Council was able to aggregate the test results according to high school and identify which high schools were sending the largest number of underprepared students to

colleges in New Jersey. This information has become the basis for a cooperative program between the high schools and the colleges to improve the academic preparation of students while they are in high school and lessen the need for remedial programs in the colleges.

In the fall of 1978, 42,984 students were tested with an additional 11,078 tested when they entered college at the second semester. For the fall of 1979, 47,725 students were tested. The results of this testing are contained in public reports issued by the Basic Skills Council. Suffice it to say that the results indicate a widespread need for remediation among entering freshmen. This judgment is based upon the colleges' own interpretation of the test results.

How useful is the test for identifying students who need remediation? One two-year college which places students into two levels of remediation in reading and writing used the results to place approximately 2,500 students in the fall of 1978. In a follow-up study the college discovered that less than 3% of the students had been placed in an inappropriate course. Further analysis of the students who had been misplaced revealed that almost all had achieved test scores which the college considered to be in a borderline area, and had been given the benefit of the doubt and placed in a higher level course than they could handle. The college has since fine-tuned its placement procedures and now claims a misplacement rate of less than 1%. There are similar reports from other colleges. The test seems to be doing what it is designed to do.

There are other benefits besides better placement of students in courses. There is the statewide data base that has been created. Using this data base, the Council proposed that remedial/developmental education be funded on a separate basis. This proposal was adopted, so that beginning with the 1979-80 academic year remedial/developmental courses in reading, writing, and mathematics

were funded on a 15 FTE to 1 basis, with additional funds allocated for such non-course activities as writing laboratories and tutors. Another benefit has been the bringing together of faculty from two- and four-year colleges from all over the state to work together on the program. In the process many ideas have been shared and independent cooperative projects started. It takes a lot of faculty to read 42,984 essays twice, and in the course of those many weekend readings faculty from two- and four-year colleges have come to learn about the common problems they share. But more importantly, they have also discovered that they have tentative solutions to those problems which they can also share.

The testing program has also provided the opportunity to undertake some interesting research. One research project currently underway has produced tentative results which indicate that a twenty-minute essay can be holistically scored on a six point scale with results as reliable as scoring the essay on a four point scale. Another study indicates that for purposes of placement into remedial courses, a twenty minute essay produces as much information as a forty-five minute essay. Still another study correlated the scores of 22,000 students on the New Jersey Basic Skills Test and the SAT and discovered some interesting information about what the SAT's do and don't do. Studies were also conducted on the item types used on the multiple-choice section of the writing test and identified which item types were the best measures of writing ability. Finally, an item characteristic curve analysis dispelled a lot of myths about testing, particularly the use of multiple-choice items to assess writing ability.

In the course of my two years as director of the New Jersey testing program I learned much. I learned what r-biserials and point-biserials are, and the difference between the two. I learned that too many teachers of writing know almost nothing about testing. I learned why testing is expensive (it costs about

$8.50 per student in the New Jersey program), and why it is difficult to construct a test (it takes about six months just to revise 25% of the 185 items on the New Jersey test). I learned why a holistic reading really begins about seven months before the first essay is even written. I learned that holistic scoring is not a simple procedure, and it is a procedure greatly misunderstood and seldom followed properly by many who claim to use it. I learned that there is a great deal of exciting new work going on in educational measurement, not the least of which is latent trait theory, the Rasch model, and item characteristic curvey theory. I learned that the Summer, 1977 issue of the Journal of Educational Measurement offers exciting information that could significantly change the way testing is conducted. Finally, I learned that testing, far from being a destructive force, is, when properly conducted and the results properly used, a tremendously positive and constructive force.

I would like to conclude by quoting from a report issued by the Basic Skills Council. This quote addresses those who question the need for a statewide testing program such as New Jersey's.

> Much of the controversy surrounding the notion of basic skills testing stems from the absence of a common understanding of what is meant by the term "basic skills." Some tests and testing programs use a similar title to describe "life skills" or "coping skills"--a group of practical proficiencies considered essential to survival in contemporary society (e.g. reading a bus schedule, balancing a check book, filling out a insurance form). Others are essentially intelligence tests or aptitude tests which may possess a general predictive alidity but do not attempt to measure ability to perform certain specific skills. From the outset, the Council has stated that its use of the term "basic skills" refer to those skills of thought and communication without which an individual cannot take advantage of the opportunities offered by a college education. In a report to the Board dated October 31, 1977 we said:
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> > By 'basic skills' the Council means the tools of intellectual discourse used in common by participating members of all academic communities. These tools are the

language of words and the language of mathematics. Students need these tools to extract information, to exercise and develop the critical faculties of the mind, and to express thoughts clearly and coherently. Without them learning is impaired, communication is imprecise, understanding is impossible. A test of 'basic skills,' therefore, is a test to determine whether an individual has developed the practical working skills of verbal and mathematical literacy needed to take advantage of the learning opportunities that colleges provide.

To define 'basic skills' in this way is not to deny the validity of other modes of communication -- within the artistic realm of discourse, for instance, the languages of music, motion, image, color, light, texture express a universe of perceptions, feelings, and emotions which cannot be expressed adequately by words and numbers and logic alone. Nor is the Council's definition of the 'basic skills' inimical to the value of diversity. We are, to the contrary, exceedingly sensitive to the differences between colleges: differences in their students, differences in their curriculua and pedagogical philosophies, differences in their missions. But in one respect all colleges are identical: their ultimate purpose is to foster learning. The Council asserts unequivocally that the 'basic skills' of reading, writing, and mathematics are a prerequisite to learning at the college level. If the possession of these skills is 'standardization,' we believe that standardization in this sense is good.

There is no longer room for confusion or uncertainty on one point: an unacceptably large proportion of the students currently entering New Jersey colleges cannot read, or write, or think in mathematical terms at levels that, without remediation, will permit them to benefit from the intellectual stimulation that college offers.

We would agree readily with those who argue that it would be unwise to teach basic skills for their own sake and to the exclusion of all other knowledge. However, we cannot accept the inference that the teaching of basic skills excludes other kinds of knowledge and experience. Indeed, it seems to us both unwise and unjust to tolerate with complacency the limitation of intellectual growth entailed by failing to develop linguistic and mathematical skills in large numbers of students. It seems grossly unfair, therefore, to tar all efforts to improve these skills with the brush of reactionary traditionalism. Certainly the fundamentals of reading, writing, and mathematics are merely means to greater ends. But they are necessary means. Without the essential tools - clarity of thought and expression - no man or woman can aspire to exercise the mind to its fullest potential, nor even to address adequately questions of fact and interpretation and value. Who can believe that a person is truly free who bears the shackles of limited literacy? We are convinced that no other educational issue surpasses the importance of this one for the welfare of our society and of the individuals who comprise it.

Furthermore, we believe that the testing program, far from being a waste of precious resources, can contribute substantially to students' potential for success in college. We know of no better way to help students succeed than to begin by identifying those who need special assistance and placing them in courses consistent with their skills, often remedial/developmental programs specifically designed to improve their skills in reading, writing, or mathematics. We know that many New Jersey colleges have successfully used the results of the New Jersey College Basic Skills Placement Test to place students in appropriate courses. We believe that this testing program is an essential ingredient of New Jersey's policy of open access to our system of higher education if that policy is to present a real opportunity for self-improvement and upward mobility rather than a revolving door to repeated failures or a continuation of the cruel hoax perpetrated by the practice of social promotion. Colleges can and should continue to admit a broad range of students while at the same time maintaining appropriate academic standards.